

The Testimony of
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Services Committee

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My name is Pittre Walker, and I thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee. For the past 9 years, I have served as the homeless liaison for Caddo Parish Schools in Shreveport, Louisiana. I am also a board member of the Louisiana Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (LAEHCY) and the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY).

I will focus my comments today on the youngest victims of homelessness – our nation’s children and youth.

Homelessness compromises the very foundation of child development. Homeless children face loss, trauma, instability, and the deprivation of extreme poverty. They suffer physically and emotionally. Infants and toddlers who are homeless are at extreme risk of developmental delays and health complications.¹ School-age children experiencing homelessness are diagnosed with learning disabilities and chronic and acute health conditions at much higher rates than other children.² They struggle academically, and many fall behind in school.

We often speak of various homeless populations as if they were distinct and separate, unconnected. Yet every adult was once a child, and many homeless adults experienced disruption in their living situations during their childhood. According to the National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients, as reported by the Interagency Council on Homelessness in 1999, 21 percent of homeless adults experienced homelessness as children, 33 percent ran away from home, and 22 percent

¹ Weinreb, L., et al., “Determinants of health and service use patterns in homeless and low-income housed children,” *Pediatrics* 102(3) (1998): 554-62. Garcia-Coll, C., et al., “The developmental status and adaptive behavior of homeless and low-income housed infants and toddlers,” *Am. J. Public Health* 88(9) (1998): 1371-4; Bassuk, E.L., et al., “Determinants of behavior in homeless and low-income housed preschool children,” *Pediatrics* 100(1) (1997): 92-100.

² The Better Homes Fund. (1999). *Homeless Children: America’s New Outcasts*, Newton, MA: Author.

were forced to leave their homes.³ This striking correlation between adverse childhood housing experiences and adult homelessness ought to be cause for concern, as well as a key topic in any conversation about ending homelessness. When we ignore or minimize child and youth homelessness, we perpetuate adult homelessness.

Tragically, children and youth have not been a focus of federal homelessness policy -- except in the area of education. We are extremely grateful for the leadership and commitment of Congresswoman Judy Biggert (R-13th/IL), whose work on the education provisions of the McKinney-Vento Act has increased the stability and success of homeless children and youth in school. Congresswoman Biggert's amendments have helped to change the very fabric of the public school system, so that our schools are more inclusive and supportive of homeless children and youth. Indeed, school has become a safety net and safe harbor for hundreds of thousands of children and youth who do not have a safe, adequate, permanent place to call home.

Yet educators have learned that without the involvement and cooperation of other community service providers, educational efforts are much less likely to succeed. A child without housing - hungry, sick, scared - faces greater barriers to academic success than just the barriers that exist inside the school itself. Homelessness affects all aspects of a person's life, and an effective and humane response brings together myriad appropriate systems to address them - including education. Public schools are the cornerstones of communities; no other entity has the same level of daily contact with children, youth, and families. Schools see the scope and the depth of housing problems in every community in the nation and, therefore, are among the most accurate barometers

³ Interagency Council on the Homeless. (1999). *"Homelessness: People and the Programs They Serve,"* Washington D.C.

of family and youth homelessness. Increasingly, educators are getting involved in housing and homelessness initiatives as way to stabilize the lives of children and youth, so that they can come to school ready and able to learn.

It is from this perspective that I offer comments on the House, Senate, and current policy approaches to the reauthorization of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Programs administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). My concerns lie in four main areas: definitions of homelessness, the community planning process, permanent housing set-asides/national priorities, and funding levels.

Definitions of Homelessness

The current HUD definition of homelessness – which encompasses those in shelters or literally on the streets – disproportionately excludes children and youth. The streets are untenable for families because living on the streets puts children at unthinkable risk – it means child welfare involvement and the separation of the family. Many homeless families, unaccompanied youth, and single adults have no choice but to stay temporarily with other people or in motels, often in overcrowded and unsafe circumstances. In many places across the country, there are no shelters, or shelters are may be full, forcing people into other homeless situations. In addition, many shelters will not accept families with older children and/or boys over the age of 10, so the family must split up or find another unstable arrangement if they wish to stay together. Thus, the current HUD definition of homelessness does not match the reality of who is homeless in my community, or communities nationwide. While this incongruity is especially true for

smaller towns and rural areas, it is also true in urban areas. The HUD definition of homelessness prevents us from meeting the needs that we are identifying.

In contrast, the definition of homelessness in the education subtitle of the McKinney-Vento Act includes children and youth who are sharing the housing of others due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason, and children and youth who live in motels, hotels, and camping grounds due to lack of adequate alternative accommodations. This definition, which public schools have used successfully for more than ten years, allows me to help those children and youth who lack stability in their housing situation enroll in school and obtain educationally related services.

Let me illustrate these points with examples from my community. Last year, Caddo Parish Schools identified and enrolled 2,031 homeless children and youth in grades K-12. Of these, 1,232 were in doubled-up situations and 72 were in motels. People who are in doubled-up situations or in motels are not “homeless” under the HUD definition. Thus, the vast majority of homeless children and youth in my parish are not eligible for HUD homeless assistance services. These statistics are in line with the national statistics: 56 percent of the 907,228 homeless children and youth identified and enrolled in the nation’s public schools in the 2005-2006 school year were in doubled-up situations, and 7 percent were in motels.⁴ In total, 63 percent of all children and youth identified as homeless by public schools in 2005-2006 were ineligible for HUD homeless assistance.

Families in doubled-up and motel situations are extremely vulnerable. Their living arrangements are crowded, very unstable, and often unsafe. In one instance, I

⁴ National Center for Homeless Education. (2007). *Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program: Analysis of 2005-2006 Federal Data Collection and Three-Year Comparison*, Greensboro, NC.

identified a family who had no place to live except the back of the mother's aunt and uncle's house. There was mold in the bathroom and large rats and other bugs crawling on the floor. With no beds available, the mother and children had to sleep on that floor. I was able to help the children enroll in school, but no HUD services were available to help this family find and maintain a better place to live. They did not meet the HUD homeless definition.

Since 1999, the homeless education program that I oversee also has received a HUD homeless assistance grant through our local Continuum of Care to provide case management services to homeless families in Region Seven, which includes Shreveport and six rural parishes. Last year, we provided 419 families (including 727 children) with housing referrals, help accessing Medicaid and Medicare, TANF, food, medical assistance, and other services. Case managers complete an overall assessment to determine what services are needed. They advocate on behalf of the families. Most case managers have built a rapport with agencies and have a contact person that they can call at any time. This helps to speed up the process for families to gain services needed. Case managers help to provide support systems that these families lack.

Yet as critical as these services are, I can help only a fraction of those who truly need assistance, since I can provide HUD case management services only to those families who meet the HUD definition of homelessness. If the HUD definition were expanded, we would be able to provide comprehensive services to more families. These families would have priority for housing and social services.

For these reasons, I strongly support the definition of homelessness contained in H.R. 840, the HEARTH Act. The HEARTH Act definition more closely aligns the HUD

definition with the education definition by including people who are sharing the housing of others due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason, and children and youth who live in motels, hotels, and camping grounds due to lack of adequate alternative accommodations. In my community, in my state, and across the nation, the HEARTH Act definition of homelessness would allow service providers to meet real needs. It is a definition that acknowledges the true extent of the affordable housing crisis, and gives us the flexibility to begin to address it.

Unfortunately, the definition of homelessness in the Senate bill, S. 1518, does not provide stability for children. It expands the current HUD definition by including:

- People in motels paid for by a government program;
- People who are doubled-up, but only if they have moved three times in one year or two times in the past 21 days, and they have been notified by the owner or renter of their lodging that they can only stay for a short time period, and they don't have resources to contribute to rent; and
- people who are in motels, but only if they have moved three times in one year or two times in the past 21 days, and they can pay for the room only for a short period of time

The Senate definition is not adequate to meet the needs of the families we serve on a daily basis. Just last Friday, I received a call from a mother of three young children, who was referred to me by the Food Stamp office. The family was moving from place to place and had nowhere to go. The mother told me she was ready to pull her children (ages 9, 12 and 14) from school – she just couldn't take it anymore. I could not allow this family to end up on the street, so I put them up in a motel using my own credit card.

I am not a government agency. I am not a charity. Was this family any less homeless? Should I have asked this mother, desperate and in crisis, for proof of her multiple moves prior to staying in the motel? What if she had only moved two times? Should I have advised her to uproot her children once more? When I called to check in on her on Sunday, her children were still sleeping; they had not slept for days previously. Constant moving and uncertainty has disrupted their lives physically and emotionally.

As this example illustrates, it would be harmful to predicate assistance on repeated moves. This flies in the face of what we know about healthy child development: routine, stability, and consistency are essential. Each and every move is traumatic and damaging for children and youth, especially those in deep poverty. Moreover, this definition will be very hard, if not impossible, for providers to verify with any degree of accuracy. Families and youth in crisis may have a hard time proving their multiple moves, especially when safety issues are present. Transportation arrangements for public schools also become more complicated and costly with multiple moves. With multiple moves, children lose books, clothing, services, stability, and friends. They are usually emotional wrecks, not knowing where they will be from day to day. Multiple moves also put children at greater risk of being physically and sexually abused by others. It is hard for homeless parents in these situations to keep their children safe.

For these reasons, S. 1518's proposed definition of "homelessness" is not satisfactory. The HEARTH Act's definition should be adopted instead. Our Continuum will not be "overwhelmed" with an expanded definition, as some have suggested; rather, we will be freed from a restrictive and short-sighted definition that currently limits our ability to help all people experiencing homelessness.

HUD's Community Planning Process

My program has been fortunate to benefit from a strong collaboration with the HUD Continuum of Care, through which we have assisted thousands of families over the past eight years. However, my program is rare: only two parish school systems in the state of Louisiana enjoy this level of collaboration and coordination. My fellow liaisons across the state – and the nation – often struggle to get a seat at the table in the HUD community planning process. Public schools are not necessarily seen as natural partners, and meeting the needs of children and youth is not always viewed as a priority. This is especially true since HUD has begun rewarding continuums that prioritize the “chronically homeless,” which, by definition, excludes children and youth.

The HEARTH Act would address this problem by requiring community homeless assistance planning boards to include the participation of local school district homeless education liaisons, or their designee. This participation would help ensure comprehensive services for families and youth, while also preventing duplication of efforts. Participation of liaisons also would provide a consistent voice for children and youth, so that their needs are not overlooked, and so that the resources of schools and community agencies can be coordinated. The HEARTH Act also would help align federal education and housing policies by requiring that Continuum of Care applications include assurances that project sponsors will establish policies and practices that are consistent with, and do not restrict the exercise of, the educational rights of homeless children and youth. It would emphasize placing families with children as close to possible to the children's school of origin so as not to disrupt their education. This

requirement is necessary in order to ensure that families and youth are never put in the position of being forced to choose between their school and a shelter bed.

Unfortunately, the Senate bill, S. 1518, contains none of these provisions for bringing public schools and shelter agencies closer together in their efforts to end homelessness, and ensuring that homeless children and youth – who are already so invisible in their communities – do not get lost in community dialogue and planning initiatives on homelessness.

There is, however, an important provision in the Senate bill that I would like to highlight and support. The Banking Committee-approved version of S. 1518 seeks to prevent family shelters, transitional housing, and permanent housing programs receiving HUD McKinney-Vento funds from denying admission to families based on the age of any of the children in the family. This provision is particularly important to help curb the practice in some family shelters and family housing of denying admission of families with older children, or denying admission to the older children only, based on the erroneous assumption that older children threaten the safety of other residents of the shelter or housing. This bias and resulting practice of denying admission to the whole family, or older children of the family, tears families apart and creates unaccompanied youth homelessness. Homeless families with older children should be allowed to remain intact to support each other as they struggle through the crisis of homelessness.

Permanent Housing Set-Asides/National Priorities

The HEARTH Act allows each community to prioritize the housing and services options that best meet local needs, based on a gaps and needs analysis to ensure that communities do not ignore top priority populations – including children and youth.

In contrast, the Senate bill codifies the 30 percent set aside limited to permanent housing for homeless individuals with disabilities and families where an adult head of household (but not a child) has a disability, adds an additional ten percent set-aside for permanent housing for non-disabled homeless families, and also codifies additional incentives focused on chronic homelessness. This top-down, one-size-fits-all approach prevents us from addressing the needs that we identify, and once again relegates children and youth to a lesser status in HUD homeless policy.

For example, current HUD policy has forced my local Continuum of Care to prioritize housing for single adults with disabilities. This is an important activity, but if it comes at the expense of housing and services for populations who are equally vulnerable, we are not doing what we need to do to end homelessness. Children and youth have disproportionately high rates of disabilities and developmental delays; indeed, the very fact of their homelessness puts them at risk. Yet HUD policy does not acknowledge the needs of children with disabilities, the ill effects of homelessness on children more generally, their need for special services, or the likelihood that without attention to their needs, they are at significant risk of experiencing homelessness as adults.

Two years ago, we provided services to a family consisting of a mother and her eight children, one of whom has a disability. They were stable for a year, and then the mother returned to Lake Charles in an unstable situation. Last year, one of the daughters

who remained in my parish came to our office in need of assistance. Now that daughter has a child, and is once again in need of housing services. Without more attention to children and youth and better services for families, the cycle of homelessness will repeat, and we will never end homelessness in this nation.

Funding

More funding also is needed for the following services:

- CDBG Funds
- HOME Funds
- Tax credits to target setasides for families in homeless situations
- More safe havens for youth

Conclusion

The current HUD approach to homelessness is not working – certainly not for children and youth. All too often, it places the needs of adults before the needs of children. In what other area of social policy do we allow ourselves to say: “Let’s take care of the adults first – the kids can wait” ?

The HEARTH Act is the best vehicle for the reauthorization of the HUD McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Programs. It provides a much stronger approach than the Senate bill, and it brings us closer to a federal policy that is inclusive, comprehensive, and responsive to the needs of all people who are homeless in our communities.